

The Family - 5. Siblings

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning, In our continuing catechesis on the family, after having considered the roles of the mother, the father, the children, today we shall reflect on *siblings*. “Brother” and “sister” are words that Christianity really loves. And, thanks to the family experience they are words that all cultures and all times comprehend.

The fraternal bond holds a special place *in the history of the People of God*, who received his revelation at the core of the human experience. The Psalmist sings of the beauty of the fraternal bond: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133[132]:1). And this is true, brotherhood is beautiful! Jesus Christ also brought to its fullness this human experience of being brothers and sisters, embracing it in Trinitarian love and thereby empowering it to go well beyond the ties of kinship and enabling it to surmount every barrier of extraneousness.

We know that *when the fraternal relationship is destroyed*, when the relationship between siblings is destroyed, the road is open to painful experiences of conflict, of betrayal, of hate. The biblical account of *Cain and Abel* is an example of this negative outcome. After the killing of Abel, God asks Cain: “Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen 4:9a). It is a question that the Lord continues to repeat to every generation. And unfortunately, in every generation, Cain’s dramatic answer never fails to be repeated: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (*ibid.*, 4:9b). The rupture of the bond between siblings is a nasty, bad thing for humanity. In the family too, how many siblings quarrel over little things, or over an inheritance, and then they no longer speak to each other, they no longer greet one another. This is terrible! Brotherhood is a great thing, when we consider that all our brothers and sisters lived in the womb of the same mother for nine months, came from the mother’s flesh! Brotherhood cannot be broken. Let us consider: we all know families that have divided siblings, who have quarrelled; let us ask the Lord — perhaps in our family there are a few cases — to help these families to reunite their siblings, to rebuild the family. Brotherhood must not be broken and when it breaks, what happened to Cain and Abel occurs. When the Lord asks Cain where his brother is, he replies: “I do not know, my brother does not matter to me”. This is terrible, it is a very, very painful thing to hear. In our prayers let us always pray for siblings who are at odds.

Should the bond of *fraternity* which *forms in the family between children* arise in an educational atmosphere of openness to others, it is the great school of freedom and peace. In the family, among siblings, human coexistence is learned, how one must live in society. Perhaps we are not always aware of it, but the family itself introduces fraternity into the world! Beginning with this first experience of fraternity, nourished by affection and education at home, the style of fraternity radiates like a promise upon the whole of society and on its relations among peoples.

The blessing that God, *in Jesus Christ*, pours out on this bond of fraternity, *expands* in an unimaginable way. He renders it capable of overcoming all differences of nationality, language, culture and even religion.

Consider what becomes of the bond between men and women, even when completely different from each other, when they are able to say of another: “He is truly like a brother, she is just like a sister to me!”. This is beautiful! History has shown well enough, after all, that even freedom and equality, without brotherhood, can be full of individualism and conformism, and even personal interests.

Familial fraternity shines in a special way when we see the care, the patience, the affection that envelop *the weakest little brother or sister*, sick or physically challenged. There are countless brothers and sisters who do this, throughout the world, and perhaps we do not appreciate their generosity enough. And when there are many siblings in a family — today, I greeted a family that has nine children? — the eldest boy or girl helps the dad, the mom, to take care of the younger children. This work of helping among siblings is beautiful.

Having a brother, a sister, who loves you is a deep, precious, irreplaceable experience. *Christian fraternity* happens in the same way. The smallest, the weakest, the poorest soften us: they have the “right” to take our heart and soul. Yes, they are our brothers and sisters and as such we must love and care for them. When this happens, when the poor are like family members, our own Christian fraternity comes to life again. Christians, in fact, go to meet the poor and the weak not to obey an ideological programme, but because the word and the example of the Lord tell us that we are all brothers and sisters. This is the principle of God’s love and of all justice among men. I should like to suggest something: before concluding, just a few words, in silence each of us, let us think of our brothers, our sisters, and from our heart let us pray in silence for them. A moment of silence.

Here then, with this prayer we have brought all, brothers and sisters, with our thoughts, with our hearts, here to the Square to receive the blessing. Today more than ever it is necessary to place fraternity back at the centre of our technocratic and bureaucratic society: then even freedom and equality will find the correct balance. Therefore, let us not thoughtlessly deprive our families, out of criticism or fear, of the beauty of a bountiful fraternal experience of sons and daughters. And let us not lose our trust in the broad horizon faith is able to draw from this experience, enlightened by God’s blessing.

The Family - 6. The Elderly

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning, Today's catechesis and next Wednesday's will be dedicated to the elderly, who in the family are the *grandparents, aunts and uncles*. Today we will reflect on the current problematic condition of the elderly, and next time, that is, next Wednesday, on a more positive note, on the vocation pertaining to this stage of life.

Thanks to the progress of medicine life-spans have increased: but society *has not "expanded" to life!* The number of elderly has multiplied, but our societies are not organized well enough to make room for them, with proper respect and practical consideration for their frailty and their dignity. While we are young, we are led to ignore old age, as if it were a disease to keep away from; then when we become old, especially if we are poor, if we are sick and alone, we experience the shortcomings of a society programmed for efficiency, which consequently ignores its elderly. And the elderly are a wealth not to be ignored.

Benedict XVI, visiting a home for the elderly, used clear and prophetic words, saying in this way: "The quality of a society, I mean of a civilization, is also judged by how it treats elderly people and by the place it gives them in community life" (12 November 2012). It's true, attention to the elderly makes the difference in a civilization. Is there attention to the elderly in a civilization? Is there room for the elderly? This civilization will move forward if it knows how to respect wisdom, the wisdom of the elderly. In a civilization in which there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away because they create problems, this society carries with it the virus of death.

In the West, scientists present the current century as *the aging century*: children are diminishing, the elderly are increasing. This imbalance challenges us, indeed, it is a great challenge for contemporary society. Yet a culture of profit insists on casting off the old like a "weight". Not only do they not produce — this culture thinks — but they are a burden: in short, what is the outcome of thinking like this? They are thrown away. It's brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away, it is a brutal thing, it is a sin! No one dares to say it openly, but it's done! There is something vile in this *adherence to the throw-away culture*. But we are accustomed to throwing people away. We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected.

During my ministry in Buenos Aires I was in direct contact with this reality and its problems: "The elderly are abandoned, and not only in material instability. They are abandoned out of a selfish incapacity to accept their limitations that reflect our own limitations, because of the numerous difficulties that must be overcome in order to survive in a society that does not allow them to participate, to have their say, or be referents in the consumer model of 'only the young can be useful and enjoy'. These elderly persons throughout society ought to be a reservoir of wisdom for our people. The elderly are the reservoir of wisdom for our people! How easily the conscience falls dormant when there is no love!" (*Solo l'amore ci può salvare*, Vatican City, 2013, p. 83).

And it happens like that. I remember, when I was visiting a retirement home, I spoke with each person and I frequently heard this: "How are you? And your children? Well, well. How many do you have? Many. And do they come to visit you?. Oh sure, yes, always, yes, they come. When was the last time they came?" I remember an elderly woman who said to me: "Mmm, for Christmas". It was August! Eight months without being visited by her children, abandoned for eight months! This is called mortal sin, understand? Once as a child, a grandmother told us the story of an old grandfather who got dirty while eating because he couldn't easily bring the spoonful of soup to his mouth. And his son, that is, the father of the family, had decided to move him from the dinner table and set up a little table in the kitchen to eat alone, so he couldn't be seen. In this way he wouldn't make a bad impression when friends came over to lunch or dinner. A few days later, he came home and found his youngest child playing with some wood and a hammer and nails, he was making something there, he said: "What are you making? — I'm making a table, papa. — A table, why? — To have one for when you grow old, so that you can eat there". Children are more aware than we are!

In the tradition of the Church there is a *wealth of wisdom* that has always supported a culture of *closeness to the elderly*, a disposition of warm and supportive companionship in this final phase of life. This tradition is rooted in Sacred Scripture, as these passages from the Book of Sirach attest: "Do not disregard the discourse of the aged, for they themselves learned from their fathers; because from them you will gain understanding and learn how to give an answer in time of need" (Sir 8:9). The Church cannot and does not want to conform to a mentality of impatience, and much less of indifference and contempt, towards old age. We must reawaken the *collective sense of gratitude*, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elder feel like a living part of his community.

Our elders are men and women, fathers and mothers, who came before us on our own road, in our own house, in our daily battle for a worthy life. They are men and women from whom we have received so much. The elder is not an alien. We are that elder: in the near or far future, but inevitably, even if we don't think it. And if we don't learn how to treat the elder better, that is how we will be treated. We old people are all a little fragile. Some, however, are *particularly weak*, many are alone, and stricken by illness. Some depend on the indispensable care and attention of others. Are we going to take a step back? Abandon them to their fate? A society without *proximity*, where *gratuity* and affection *without compensation*— between strangers as well — is disappearing, is a perverse society. The Church, faithful to the Word of God, cannot tolerate such degeneration. A Christian community in which proximity and gratuity are no longer considered indispensable is a society which would lose her soul. Where there is no honour for elders, there is no future for the young.